



FREEDOM HOUSE

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Freedom in the World - Liberia (2009)

Capital:
Monrovia

Population:
3,900,000

Political Rights Score: 3 *

Civil Liberties Score: 4 *

Status: Partly Free

Overview

President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf continued her anticorruption campaign in 2008, but her administration faced accusations of abuse of power after local elections were canceled for financial reasons and the Supreme Court gave her the authority to appoint mayors. Also during the year, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission began hearing testimony despite a series of delays and problems with transparency.

Liberia was settled in 1821 by freed slaves from the United States and became an independent republic in 1847. Americo-Liberians, descendants of the freed slaves, dominated the political landscape until 1980, when army sergeant Samuel Doe murdered President William Tolbert in a bloody coup. Doe's regime concentrated power among members of his Krahn ethnic group and suppressed other groups. In 1989, forces led by former government minister Charles Taylor and backed by the Gio and Mano ethnic groups launched a guerrilla insurgency from neighboring Cote d'Ivoire. A year later, Nigeria, under the aegis of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), led an armed intervention, preventing Taylor from seizing the capital but failing to protect Doe from being killed by a splinter rebel group led by Prince Johnson.

After seven years of endemic violence, a peace accord was signed, and Taylor won national elections in 1997. Nevertheless, violence continued, and Taylor made little effort to seek genuine reconciliation. Some of his rivals eventually formed Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), drawing support primarily from the Mandingo ethnic group, and launched an uprising from neighboring Guinea. With rebels poised to overrun the capital and the United States calling for him to step down, Taylor resigned in August 2003 and accepted Nigeria's offer of asylum.

Taylor's departure quickly ended 14 years of intermittent civil war that had spilled over into three neighboring countries and left 200,000 Liberians dead. ECOWAS helped negotiate an end to the fighting, and West African peacekeepers became part of a 15,000-strong, UN-led force tasked with overseeing disarmament and demobilization. Delegates to the 2003 peace talks chose businessman Charles Gyude Bryant as Liberia's interim president, and he ruled the country until the 2005 elections.

Harvard-educated economist and Unity Party (UP) candidate Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf won the presidential runoff vote in November 2005, soundly defeating the first-round winner, Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) candidate and international soccer star George Weah. During the concurrent legislative polls, 12 parties—including those of former warlords such as Prince Johnson—secured seats, as did a

handful of independents. The CDC placed first with 18 seats, followed by the UP with 11.

Taylor, who had been indicted by the UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone in 2003 for allegedly arming Sierra Leonean rebels in exchange for diamonds, was finally turned over to the court in 2006. His trial began in June 2007 in The Hague, the Netherlands, but was suspended until January 2008, when the court finally began hearing prosecution testimony.

Also in 2008, Liberia's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, established in 2006, at last began hearing testimony. Prince Johnson appeared before the court in August. There were calls for Johnson-Sirleaf to appear as well, but she did not do so during the year.

Since her inauguration in January 2006, Johnson-Sirleaf had made some noteworthy progress on fulfilling campaign promises to repair infrastructure and combat corruption. At the same time, opposition lawmakers began accusing her of increasing the power of the central government, particularly the executive branch. These claims intensified in early 2008, when the Supreme Court granted Johnson-Sirleaf the authority to appoint mayors after municipal elections, which would have been the first since 1985, were canceled, ostensibly due to financial constraints. The president's supporters argued that centralization of power was unavoidable given the difficulty of passing reforms that were needed to maintain peace. The international community has sided with Johnson-Sirleaf to date, and continues to invest in the country and forgive public debt amid signs of improving governance.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Liberia is an electoral democracy. International observers determined that the 2005 presidential and legislative elections were free and fair. The bicameral National Assembly consists of a 30-member Senate and a 64-member House of Representatives; senators are elected to nine-year terms, and representatives are elected to six-year terms. Presidents also serve six-year terms and are eligible for a second term. Major political parties include President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's UP, George Weah's CDC, the Liberty Party, and the National Patriotic Party of former president Charles Taylor. In 2008, municipal elections that were planned for October were canceled, ostensibly for financial reasons, and the Supreme Court subsequently granted Johnson-Sirleaf the authority to appoint mayors instead.

Johnson-Sirleaf has made fighting corruption a central goal of her administration. The transitional administration of 2003–05 is believed to have stolen some \$100 million in public funds, and the government has begun prosecuting a number of suspects, including interim president Charles Gyude Bryant. However, Bryant's trial was suspended at the end of 2008, along with the embezzlement cases of a number of other transitional government officials, and he argues that his continued prosecution jeopardizes peace. Meanwhile, Johnson-Sirleaf has dismissed a number of low-ranking officials in her own administration who have been accused of corruption. In August 2008, she approved the creation of the Liberian Anti-Corruption Commission, but due to resistance from the National Assembly, the commission will be barred from investigating corruption under previous regimes. A freedom of information bill was introduced in the National Assembly, though it was

not passed by year's end. Nonetheless, a number of companies in the mining, timber, and rubber industries pledged to publicize their financial information in an agreement with the government. The country's progress in combating corruption is perceived favorably by the international community and has been a crucial factor in the World Bank's moves to cancel much of Liberia's debt. Liberia was ranked 138 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Since the expulsion of Charles Taylor, the media environment has become decidedly more open. There are more than 30 newspapers publishing primarily in Monrovia, and nearly 50 radio stations operate across the country. Even so, journalists continue to face harassment. For example, Liberian National Police assigned to a small town assaulted and briefly detained a radio journalist in March under order of the commander of the local Women and Child Protection police unit. The journalist had arrived at the unit to follow up on a story about a stolen child and was only released after the intervention of a local politician. Controversially, after its establishment this year the Truth and Reconciliation Commission decided that journalists attending its proceedings would be required to obtain accreditation from the commission itself.

Religious freedom is respected in practice. Muslims occasionally face discrimination, particularly because many are from the Mandingo tribe, a key ethnic component of the LURD rebel group. Most government officials are Christian, and all private businesses and public markets must close on Sunday and major Christian holidays. There are, however, seven Muslim members of the parliament. In January 2008, the minister of information, supported by the Muslim community, proposed that Ramadan be recognized as a national holiday in the interest of religious fairness and equality, though the idea was rejected by the legislature and did not receive the president's support.

The government does not restrict academic freedom. As part of the postwar reconstruction process, the government and international donors have actively encouraged primary and secondary school enrollment. However, the educational infrastructure is struggling to keep up with the influx, and many students are taught by unqualified teachers in ill-equipped classrooms.

Freedom of assembly is guaranteed and respected. Numerous civil society groups, including human rights organizations, operate in the country. The right of workers to strike, organize, and bargain collectively is recognized. Peaceful demonstrations are permitted, and this right was regularly exercised during the year. A number of protests sparked by ongoing economic hardship turned violent in 2008. In addition, a prominent advocate for the establishment of a war crimes tribunal for Liberia was detained early in the year after he announced plans to hold a public demonstration and to present grievances to U.S. president George W. Bush during his visit to Liberia. The advocate, Mulbah Morlu, was detained long enough to prevent him from meeting with Bush. Much-needed reforms to the country's labor laws were approved in January 2008, including new rules barring the dismissal of longtime employees without cause.

Under previous administrations, the judiciary was subject to extensive executive influence, intimidation by security forces, and corruption stemming from low salaries. Though Johnson-Sirleaf has pledged to build a functioning justice system,

the funding allocated for that purpose has so far been inadequate. Following the 2008 Supreme Court decision to give Johnson-Sirleaf the authority to appoint mayors, critics expressed growing doubts about the independence of the judiciary. Separately, the legislature passed a law in July that allowed the death penalty for certain crimes, despite the fact that Liberia signed an international pact against the death penalty in 2005.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which began functioning in 2006, has the power to investigate crimes committed between January 1979 and October 2003, and to recommend for prosecution those individuals deemed responsible for the most serious human rights violations. It has encountered a series of delays and only began hearing testimony at the beginning of 2008. Furthermore, the witnesses were not provided with psychiatric follow-up or adequate protection. The commission was forced to temporarily suspend its work in March due to concerns about the transparency of its operations, and a working group was established to investigate. After hearings resumed later in the year, former warlord Prince Johnson appeared before the commission, but Johnson-Sirleaf declined repeated calls for her to do the same.

Many of Liberia's prisons were destroyed during the war, and most have not yet been rebuilt. However, the National Palace of Corrections, which is intended to house 294 prisoners, was reopened for the first time since the war in July 2008. The additional space will help reduce overcrowding. Prison conditions in general continue to be poor, reports of abuse of female and juvenile inmates are common, and jailbreaks are frequent.

The police force is being restructured under the 2003 peace accord. While it has reached its planned strength of 3,500 officers, it still faces a lack of equipment and, at times, a lack of discipline; reports of police intimidation and abuse continue. While more than 100,000 former combatants have been disarmed and 90,000 have directly benefited from reintegration programs, the lack of available jobs—within both the police and the civilian workforce—has led to concerns that they are being recruited into regional militias once again. To compensate for some of the perceived problems with the existing police force, the government has established an elite Emergency Response Unit of no more than 500 men, whose training is set to be completed by mid-2009.

Interethnic relations continue to be strained, since many groups fought one another during the civil war. Animosity lingers primarily among the Krahn, Gio, Mano, and Mandingo ethnicities.

The treatment of women varies by ethnic group, religion, and social status. During the civil war, women and girls were often abducted as laborers or for sexual exploitation, while others joined rebel groups and militias to protect themselves. Even after the civil war, many women continue to suffer physical abuse, particularly in the Monrovia area. The United Nations considers the persistence of widespread gender-based violence, including rape, to be one of the main problems currently facing Liberia. In September 2008, a special police office funded by Norway and the United Nations was established to protect women and children, particularly against sex crimes. Child trafficking is a persistent problem in Liberia. The government has limited facilities to combat it and investigated only seven trafficking cases in 2008. Orphanages are often used as a cover for trafficking

operations or as a vehicle for fraudulently obtaining international donations.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*